

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time– C Cycle
September 1, 2013

(Sirach 3, 17-18.20.28-29; Heb 12, 18-19.22-24; Luke 14 1.7-14)

A man was sitting at a bar on the top floor of a tall building, having a drink. A second man came in (man #2), sat next to man #1 and started making small talk. In the course of their conversation, he asked man #1 what he was drinking. Man #1 said this is my magic potion. Man #2 inquired what is a magic potent. Man #1 said watch and I'll show you. He got down off the bar stool, walked to the edge of the building and flew around the building, and did a few somersaults as he flew around. He came back to the bar and said that's a magic potent. Man #2 said to the bartender "I'll have one of whatever he's drinking." He downed his drink, walked to the edge of the building, jumped off and went straight down until he crashed on the sidewalk below. The bartender said to man #1, "You know when you've had too much to drink, you're a complete jerk, Superman!" In today's gospel Jesus is talking to people at a dinner who each thought they were Superman, not in the sense that they could fly, but in the sense that they were superior to the rest of the invited guests. As I reflected on today's readings, I thought the most important thing I can talk about today is Jesus' lesson on humility. The capital sin of pride can hurt us in many ways other than just causing us some occasional humiliation or embarrassment. It stands in the way of our relationship with God and with others.

Let me clarify something here before I get too deep into this topic. There is a good kind of pride. It is a healthy pride founded on truth and grounded in reality. It is the recognition of the talents or accomplishments we can lay claim to. If God has given a person certain gifts, such as being able to sing or being very bright and that person denies they have such gifts, "I'm not very smart or I'm just tone deaf" that person is not being humble, they are just mistaken or they just are fishing for compliments, expecting someone to respond: "Don't say that! You are so talented!" Healthy pride also acknowledges that what we have accomplished in life was due to the support and help of others. It is unhealthy pride or neurotic pride that is full of self-love. We blow our talents and accomplishments out of proportion, we convince ourselves we are greater than we really are, we are more important than we really are.

I could speculate that neurotic pride started with our first parents who were told by the devil that if they did what God told them not to do, they would be like God. Bertrand Russell, the philosopher, said: "Every man would like to be God if it were possible; some few find it difficult to admit the impossibility." That's how neurotic pride gets in the way of our relationship with God, because for a proud person, God is someone he or she is competing with rather than a person who is respected, obeyed and loved.

I have learned a lot about humility by learning to laugh at myself. So many times I've seen someone do something stupid and if I'm in a hurry or they annoy me, I think uncomplimentary things about that person. And before I know it I catch myself doing the same thing. Then I just have a good laugh at myself and learn not to be so critical of others when I see them making a mistake. Making mistakes is part of being human. If a person thinks they should be above making mistakes, that's neurotic pride. The

irony of it is, when they do make a mistake, their pride comes down on them with a vengeance, telling them they are stupid or worthless or useless or whatever, because they did not live up to the unrealistic degree of perfection they had imagined to themselves that they possessed. This may seem contradictory, but I have found in counseling that often people who are really hard on themselves, angry, hating or blaming themselves, are very prideful persons who set impossible standards for themselves. Certainly we should try to do our best and keep working to improve ourselves, but only God is perfect.

Alex Haley who wrote the novel *Roots* and who was responsible for the highly successful TV series in the 70's said he has in his office a picture of a turtle sitting on a fencepost. He said when he looks at it he remembers a lesson taught to him by a friend who said: "if you see a turtle sitting on top of a fencepost, you know he didn't get there by himself, he had some help getting there." Haley said "anytime I start thinking 'isn't it wonderful the things I've done,' I look at the picture of this turtle and I see myself and I remember I didn't get where I am without a lot of help from others." (*Preaching Resources; Celebration; Sept 1, 2013*)

I thought this story is a good image of humility, recognizing the worth of the talents and accomplishments that we can lay claim to, without forgetting the help and the gifts that have been given to us.

I think one way to gain humility is through prayer. When we fail to pray, we are acting as if we think we can handle things ourselves. When we pray, we are practicing or learning humility because we are reaching out to Another (spelled with a capital "A") to whom we owe all we have and are.

Then there are the hundreds of others too: parents, other relatives, friends, neighbors, co-workers, even people who drive us crazy who have helped to form us and make us who we are. Humility makes us aware we are not the center of the universe, but one small piece of it. That is where the second part of our gospel comes in. Aware that so many have helped us, how can we not reach out to help those who have not been as blessed as we have been. Jesus doesn't mean we are not allowed to invite friends, relatives, neighbors to dinner; I think he says that for emphasis. He just doesn't want us to forget those who do not have the wherewithal to invite us in return. That is also humility. If I can say anything helpful to you today, work to avoid excessive pride. Don't forget the turtle on the fencepost and don't forget to be grateful to God and to the people who brought you to where you are. Amen.

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time– C Cycle
September 8, 2013

INTRODUCTION: (*Philemon: 9-10,12-17*) To understand our second reading, I need to explain something about slavery in the Roman Empire because Paul's letter is about a slave named Onesimus and prisons because Paul was in prison. First slavery: slavery

was common in the Roman Empire but much different than our experience of slavery before the Civil War. Slaves came from nations and peoples that Rome had conquered and most slaves were probably white; many would have been educated and would have worked as musicians, scribes, craftsmen, teachers and even doctors. A slave owner could set any of his or her slaves free or a slave could buy his or her own freedom. Today's second reading is about a slave named Onesimus (a name which means "useful"). Onesimus escaped from his owner, and if he were caught he could have been put to death. Out of desperation he ran to Paul, for he knew Paul and Paul had converted his owner, Philemon, to belief in Christ. Paul was in prison at the time awaiting trial. Regarding prisons, the Romans did not consider it a punishment to give a person a roof over their head and three square meals a day. Prison was just temporary until a Roman magistrate decided the prisoner would be executed, sent into exile, have their property confiscated, or be set free. Often prisoners needed friends or family to provide for their basic needs and, apparently, Onesimus did that for Paul. For Paul, Onesimus lived up to his name: useful. In the process Paul converted him to Christ. Paul thus refers to Onesimus as his own child for he has led him to rebirth in Christ. Paul would have liked to keep Onesimus with him to help him, but he felt an obligation to send him back to Philemon. He didn't feel right benefiting from a gift that had not been given to him. In the letter we hear in today's second reading, Paul asked Philemon to receive Onesimus back, not as property he might own, but as a brother in the Lord. Christianity transcends all of our relationships.

HOMILY: (*Luke 14, 25-33*)

Before I comment on the particular passage I just read, I think today would be a good opportunity to comment on the formation of the gospels in general. Right away, after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the small Christian community began to gather to pray, to listen to the instructions of the Apostles and to celebrate the Eucharist – which is what believers have been doing for 2000 years. (Acts 2,42) The community would hear over and over the story of Jesus, his teachings, his marvelous works and his death and resurrection. These stories about Jesus and the breaking of the bread formed their faith and their lives. As the faith spread in various directions and as the Church grew, these stories were written down, but these writings were not yet the gospels as we have them. They were a collection of stories the community wanted to hold on to. I might mention Paul's letters were written earlier than the gospels were. For example, Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians (the earliest of his letter that we have) was written in 50 or 51, while Mark's gospel (the earliest gospel we have) was not written until sometime probably in the early 60's (at least 10 years later). Luke's gospel is dated around 80 to 85 and Matthew's is dated probably in the late 80's, a few years after Luke. Both Luke and Matthew depended on Mark's gospel when they wrote theirs, but Luke and Matthew also have material that Mark does not have. Scholars hypothesize they evidentially borrowed from another source. That source no longer exists, and it is referred to in the literature as Q. Q stands for Quelle - the German word for source.

I said this would be a good Sunday to say all of this because we see evidence of it in today's gospel. Today's gospel involves some very difficult sayings of Jesus. Luke pictures Jesus speaking about the conditions of discipleship – there are three, each

ending with the words “cannot be my disciple.” The first condition is that one must hate one’s father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters and even one’s own life. A similar saying is in Matthew, but not in Mark, by which scholars conclude that Matthew and Luke got this saying from a source other than Mark, thus the Q source. To hate one’s parents and family in the sense of detesting them would be monstrous and not at all characteristic of Jesus. But the Greek word for hate also means to disregard rather than giving preferential treatment to someone. St. Matthew caught the sense of what Jesus was saying when he quotes Jesus as saying: “Whoever loves his father or mother, brother or sister, more than me is not worthy of me.” (Mt. 10,37) In other words, Jesus must come first in our lives, first before even those closest to us; he must even be more important to us than our very lives.

Do not fear that you are failing this requirement because your feelings may be very strong toward your family or toward your own life. It’s not a matter of feelings of affection, but it’s a matter of not letting anyone or anything be valued or become more important than your commitment to Jesus. The martyrs experienced this in giving up their lives rather than turning away from their belief in Jesus. This may sound pretty harsh, but basically it is not much different than the first of the ten Commandments: “I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt not have strange gods before me.” Anything in our lives that we would place higher than God, we have made into a god.

The second requirement for discipleship is about carrying our cross and following Jesus. It is similar to the first requirement in that Jesus requires our willingness to face radical self-denial. We have heard this statement before both from Matthew, (10,38) and Mark,(8,35). Thus it probably comes from Mark. The third requirement, a willingness to give up one’s material possessions is found only in Luke. (Matthew and Luke seem to have had sources that each could draw from that the other did not). Jesus did not ask everyone he knew to give up all their possessions; some of his friends had to have been well off, but if our possessions prevent us from being able to serve God, then we have to say “goodbye” to them. In Mark 8,36 we do find a similar idea where Jesus says: “What profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life (meaning eternal life)? Entering into the Kingdom of God is worth more than all the riches in the world.

Jesus’ two little parables, about the tower and about the king going to war, remind us that following Jesus is a serious decision. It is ironic that this example of a king deliberating about going into battle falls on this weekend. Our president is at this moment deliberating over taking military action against Syria. I hope the Holy Spirit guides our legislators in the right direction. This is certainly worthy of our prayers. Amen.

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time– C Cycle
September 15, 2013

INTRODUCTION: God's forgiveness is today's theme. Our first reading (*Exodus 32,7-11.13-14*) takes us back to Moses, about 1300 years before Christ. The people of Israel had just escaped from Egypt and were going through the desert of Sinai on their way to the Promised Land. They had already made a covenant with God at Mt. Sinai, and they had promised they would worship only the God of Israel as their God. When God called Moses back to the top of Mt. Sinai to speak with him again, the people got into trouble. They fashioned for themselves a golden calf and worshipped it as their god. This is where our first reading begins. God is angry with his people. Notice, in speaking to Moses, he calls them "your people." Moses intercedes for the people and "convinces" God to be forgiving. His prayer displays total unselfishness. God, of course, forgives them. In the second reading, we hear St. Paul describe what a sinful person he once was and how God was merciful to him (*1 Tim, 1,12-17*). In today's gospel, which is the entire fifteenth chapter of St. Luke, we hear three beautiful parables on God's forgiveness (*Lk. 15,1-32*).

HOMILY: We just heard several beautiful stories about God and about God's mercy: the first reading tells us how God forgave his people for worshipping a Canaanite god right after they promised to worship only the God of Israel. We heard how God forgave Paul after he had been persecuting Christians. We heard three parables from Jesus, each one illustrating God's mercy. The readings were long and the message was clear, so I don't think I need to speak very long today. There are just a couple of details I would like to point out. First notice the joy Jesus talks about in each parable. In the story of the prodigal son, the word joy is not used, but we can see the joy expressed by the father when he sees his wayward son. The father runs to him. In that culture older men did not run, it was undignified, but the father ran and welcomed his son, even without giving the son a chance to make his apology. God's happiness is so great when we have been away from him and then we return.

Another detail I want to stress. In the first two parables about the lost sheep and the lost coin, the persons who lost them, the shepherd and the lady, actively searched for what they lost until they found what they were seeking. With the prodigal son, the father did not actively chase after his son to drag him home. He waited and watched and hoped his son might return. As in the parable of the sheep and the coin, God actively seeks to lead us back to himself if we have strayed, but as in the prodigal son, God waits for us to make the decision to return. God respects our free will, and if we choose to separate ourselves from him, it's up to us to choose to return or as the parable puts it, "to come to our senses."

The last thing I want to mention is the older brother. Jesus leaves us in suspense as to whether he forgave his younger brother. We can't be too hard on the older brother for feeling the way he did. Remember, the younger brother asked for his half of the inheritance so everything that was left would eventually belong to the older brother. Here is the forgiving father spending a significant portion of the older brother's assets in

order to welcome back his prodigal son. When Jesus tells us “be merciful, just as also your Father is merciful,” (Lk. 6,36) it is sometimes a big order. Amen.

Fr. Joe did not preach Week 25

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time– C Cycle
September 29, 2013

INTRODUCTION: Today in our first reading we listen to the prophet Amos. (*Amos 6, 1a.4-7*) His words are directed to those living in the southern kingdom of Israel - the area we call Judea. He addresses them as “the complacent in Zion.” (Zion is another name for Jerusalem). Perhaps this warning came after the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. The northern kingdom is called Joseph in today’s reading, because it was there that their ancestors, descendants of the patriarch Joseph, settled in that area 500 years earlier. The complacent in Jerusalem were living pampered, comfortable lives, paying no attention to the devastation of the north and not concerned that their own country was headed toward the same fate because of their social and moral depravity.

HOMILY:

I do not remember anywhere in the Scriptures where Jesus condemned the wealthy simply for having wealth. But he gave many warnings about the dangers of being wealthy. He condemned those who allowed their wealth to make them forget about the God who had blessed them so generously – like the farmer we heard about several weeks ago. He had such a great harvest that he had to tear down his barns to build bigger ones and he gave no thought to the afterlife. Or Jesus condemned those who allowed their wealth to lead them into dishonesty like the unjust steward we heard about last week. Or Jesus condemned those who allowed wealth to make them selfish and self-centered like the rich man in today’s gospel.

Today’s parable would have been quite a shock for those who heard it. For in Jewish mentality, if a person was wealthy they were assumed to be good people whom God favored. If a person were poor or sick or infirmed, they were assumed to be sinners whom God was punishing for something. But the rich man in today’s gospel was not necessarily a virtuous man, his only care in life was caring about himself. And poor Lazarus was not necessarily a sinner – he was just a guy down on his luck. It is a story that reminds us that those who wish to be part of God’s kingdom must love God and others. Just as it is the supreme law in a successful marriage, love is the supreme law. The love that Jesus talks about is not necessarily a love based on emotion or feeling good, it flows from a desire to serve and to help others.

What should the rich man have done? Jesus doesn’t give us a specific answer. Perhaps in today’s parable, Jesus wants us to ask ourselves what we might have done if we were in his place. Does Jesus want us to help everyone we know who is in need?

Our world is a lot more complicated than was the world of Jesus. When there is a crisis or disaster on the other side of the world, we know about it instantly. Are we supposed to respond to every appeal for help? It's impossible for any one of us to respond to every need. But because we can't respond to every request for help, does not mean we don't have to respond to any request for help. We have to evaluate what our time and resources allow, what kind of need the other person might have, how real their need is or whether the request is a scam and what responsibility I may have toward them. Charity should begin at home, but it doesn't need to stay there. What does Jesus ask of us? He gives us a hint: we have the Scriptures to guide us – we don't need one of the saints to appear to us to tell us what to do and how we should help others - as Abraham tells the rich man: "they have Moses and the Prophets." If we don't pay attention to the Scriptures, we're not going to be impressed by the appearance of someone who rises from the dead. We come to the Eucharist today to remember where our blessings come from and to offer thanks, and we ask God's help for the days ahead because we never know when we might find that we ourselves are in desperate need of help from others. Amen.